



September 18, 2020

Honorable Terry Canales
Chair; House Committee on Transportation
Texas House of Representatives

Re: House Committee on Transportation, Interim Charge 2

Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee:

Scenic Texas, the state's only non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of our state's visual environment, particularly as seen by the traveling public, has become increasingly concerned with recent measures enacted by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) in an effort to reduce the state's traffic deaths.

TxDOT has let and funded two projects in east Texas' Atlanta District, comprised of Bowie, Cass, Titus, Morris, Camp, Upshur, Marion, Harrison, and Panola Counties, that would increase the existing 'clearance zone' alongside highways from 30 feet to 60 feet, arbitrarily clearing over 250 acres of native Piney Wood trees. The agency has cited this 'clear-cutting' as a measure to reduce fatalities as part of the Texas Transportation Commission's goal of ending traffic deaths in the state by 2050, otherwise known as the 'Road to Zero' campaign.

Scenic Texas takes seriously that our state's infrastructure should meet rigorous safety standards and provide ample clearance in case of an accident or need to pull over. **As such, Scenic Texas recognizes widely-accepted state and federal studies that establish existing 30-foot clear zones provide ample space for public safety.** Engineers from Atlanta District have seemingly based their decision to expand this already generous clear zone on intuition rather than evidence. **No state or national studies, data, or calculations have been publicly provided to support this decision for expansion.**

In a July 13 letter sent to the Texas Transportation Commission, TxDOT, and state legislators, Scenic Texas outlined its concerns about these two TxDOT projects in the agency's Atlanta District. On August 11, Scenic Texas received a response from TxDOT, which cited safety concerns as justification for the removal. The letter goes on to note that the agency "will be planting wildflowers along the stretch of roadways where the trees have been removed."

This 'clear-cutting' is contrary to the 20-year old Green Ribbon Program, a taxpayer-funded initiative intended for the abatement of non-attainment standards under the Clean Air Act through the planting of highway trees and shrubs. While Scenic Texas is in support of most beautification efforts by TxDOT, we are opposed to the clearing of native trees only to plant wildflowers in their place. In addition to severely altering the beauty of our highways, taxpayers will first be paying for the clear-cutting of trees and then will be assuming the cost of subsequently planting wildflowers and the perpetual maintenance of this Rights-of-Way (ROW) zone. As the state prepares to face a major budget deficit during the coming session, Scenic Texas questions whether spending millions on unnecessary and unjustified tree removal should be a fiscal priority of the state.

Scenic Texas

Information was provided to Scenic Texas on the number of off-road crashes in the area; however, no additional detail was provided regarding whether fatalities involving drivers hitting trees had other contributing factors, such as distracted driving, drunk driving, texting, or driver error. The following data on accidents was provided by TxDOT:

- Approximately 6,400 individuals were involved in off-road crashes, and 1,459 of those hit trees;
- On I-30, where one of the projects is located, 21 fatalities and 68 serious injuries have occurred, 58 of the 68 hit trees;
- On I-20, where one of the projects is located, 11 fatalities and 30 serious injuries have occurred.

Scenic Texas believes that most Texans cherish the scenic beauty this state has to offer, namely the iconic Piney Woods of East Texas; and while we know people enjoy the aesthetic of the state's natural landscape, there are also a number of studies that conclude that trees along highways help to slow down drivers.

According to a 2018 study by the University of Washington, "while not completely understood, the presence of street trees may provide an "edge effect" or psychological cue to drive more slowly. Fewer crash incidents, and less severe injury outcomes, are associated with slower vehicle speeds." | [Safe Streets](#)

According to research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, "Planners must understand the impacts of trees on roadway user safety as they work to reduce crash risk. Although spatial analysis suggests there may be a negative relationship between trees and crash frequency, correlation models find a significant correlation between trees and crash severity, but no significant correlation between trees and crash frequency" | [Influence of Street Trees on Roadway User Safety](#)

Lastly, according to research from the Institute of Transportation Engineers, "tree-lined streets were perceived to be safer in both urban and suburban conditions. Individual driving speeds were significantly reduced in the suburban settings with trees." | [The Street Tree Effect and Driver Safety](#)

In addition, there are a number of studies that link "decreased exposure to nature causing changes in psychological functioning." According to the [International Journal of Landscape Science, Planning and Design](#), researchers "found that window views of nature from the office and home were associated with higher degrees of well-being and life satisfaction. Research showed that among children living in urban environments, those who had everyday views of nature (e.g., a tree outside their apartment window, instead of a view of concrete) performed better on tasks that measured working memory (backward digit span, backward alphabet span), impulse inhibition (matching familiar figures task), selective attention (Stroop color-word task), and concentration. These findings suggest that greater exposure to natural environments may be associated with a range of important benefits." According to the [American Public Health Coalition](#), "living in a greener environment is positively related to better perceived health in addition to fewer health problems."

Scenic Texas maintains that the current 30-foot clearance zone has proven to be ample enough space for public protection, and that clear-cutting publicly-owned trees beyond 30 feet has not been proven to increase highway safety. Moreover, it reflects a lack of good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and harms the state's iconic scenic beauty. These projects will set a negative precedent for TxDOT to arbitrarily double the clearance zone in not only in east Texas, but across the state, destroying hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of publicly-owned trees.



Scenic Texas respectfully urges the Committee to work with TxDOT Commissioners and staff to identify evidence-based solutions to reduce our state's traffic deaths rather than needlessly removing hundreds of acres of some of our state's most revered landscape.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Tober".

Sarah Tober, Executive Director
Scenic Texas